

TESTIMONY OF

THE HONORABLE RETA GRIFFITH

COMMISSIONER

POCAHONTAS COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

ON BEHALF OF

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

&

THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' ASSOCIATION OF WEST VIRGINIA

BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APRIL 21, 2005

Good morning, Chairman Goodlatte, Congressman Peterson, and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Reta Griffith and I am a member of the Board of Commissioners of Pocahontas County in the State of West Virginia. Pocahontas County is one of the largest in West Virginia with 940 square miles, yet it has one of the smallest populations – just over 9,000 in the last census. Over 53% of the county is in the Monongahela National Forest.

I am testifying today as the Vice Chair of the Federal Land Payments Subcommittee of the National Association of Counties. It is also my privilege to represent the County Commissioners' Association of West Virginia. CCAWV members include elected county commissioners from all 55 West Virginia counties.

I thank the subcommittee for scheduling this hearing on the implementation of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000.

Today I will give you a snapshot of the way that Titles I and III are being used to serve the youth in one rural county in the eastern United States.

Unlike many of my NACo colleagues, county officials in West Virginia do not have the responsibility to maintain roads and bridges. Our state Department of Transportation has that job. Nevertheless, we did, however, recognize the value of choosing to participate in the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination

Act for the benefit that would accrue to young people in the county. According to our local school superintendent, the \$485 thousand that Pocahontas County Schools receives under Title I is about five percent of its annual operating budget. This is clearly a significant contribution.

It is even more important when one considers that the rugged, mountainous topography of Pocahontas County – like that of many of the counties covered by this legislation – adds so much to the cost of educating our kids. For example the Pleasants County, WV, school system has about the same number of students as we do, but a much smaller, accessible geographical area. Pleasants County only needs fifteen school bus drivers, while Pocahontas County schools must employ 24. Those nine additional drivers, alone, cost our school district nearly \$350 thousand, not to mention the cost of purchasing and maintaining the additional buses.

Our superintendent also notes that despite our small population and limited financial resources, Pocahontas County Schools have maintained an excellent record in student achievement. In the 2002-2003 school year it was one of only eleven counties in West Virginia to meet all of the No Child Left Behind guidelines. Like so many other counties in rural America, we know how to make every dollar count.

The Pocahontas County Commission also voted unanimously to invest the remaining 15% of the stabilization funds into a Title III project, specifically the

Pocahontas Woods project. Pocahontas Woods is a non-profit corporation chartered to promote the creative and ecologically sound utilization, enjoyment and understanding of the forest resource in Pocahontas County and surrounding areas. Pocahontas Woods is currently running an educational program that provides the necessary training for students and adults who are seeking to enhance their skills in the woodworking field as a means of helping create high-end woodworking industry in Pocahontas County and the surrounding communities that will provide an economic benefit to these communities.

Pocahontas Woods is conducting woodworking classes for both students and adults on an on-going basis in temporary facilities at Pocahontas County High School. The classes are conducted immediately at the close of the school day as well as in the evening to assure that everyone interested has an opportunity to attend. To date, over 120 students have attended one or more of these classes. They have developed a formal apprenticeship program for prospective woodworkers to be conducted during the summer school recess. This program places students with master woodworkers to give them an in-depth orientation of the requirements to owning and operating a successful business. They conducted a pilot program during the summer of 2004 and will implement the full program in 2005.

Pocahontas Woods is working on plans for a permanent educational facility that could be used more frequently and possibly as a business incubator for local woodworkers. It is also working to expand the scope of its activities to include other

forest-related out-of-school educational programs, including lumber grading for the layman and short courses in forestry and wildlife biology.

We have received valuable assistance from Oregon counties and our local forest service to make sure we are spending funds in compliance with the federal law. The Board of Pocahontas Woods has members from the school board, a county commissioner, the timber industry and others in the community, including a non-voting representative from the Forest Service. The group is also working with a Rockingham College in North Carolina to set up a program to allow students of our program to get a four year degree and continue their work in forestry related fields. We have provided for public comment on each year's allocation of funds and have been collecting reports from the grantee on how funds have been spent and are budgeted to be spent. We have wonderful open communication with the Pocahontas Woods and they consult the County Commissioners regularly to make sure we are aware of their program and how the funds are being used.

We are grateful for the resources which have been made available to us under Title I and Title III. We hope that you will find us to have been good stewards of the funds and that we are achieving the purposes you set for us when you enacted the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act.

Thank you.